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DEPARTMENT FOR SRAP, SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM

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SUBJECT: AFGHAN ELECTIONS: MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT SECOND ROUND

Classified By: IPA Coordinator Scott F. Kilner for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The current mood in the provinces regarding the second round of the presidential election varies widely throughout Afghanistan. Government officials and members of the public, mostly supporters of President Karzai, express fatigue with this protracted political process, and question why their first round votes "did not count." Many say they believe foreign interference is "to blame" for the result, while others say a second round could be an unnecessary waste of money that could be better used to help the people of Afghanistan. Tension and the possibility of violence in Abdullah areas have subsided, at least for the moment, and some voters have even expressed enthusiasm for a possible come-from-behind Abdullah victory.

¶2. (SBU) In more educated areas, such as Nangarhar and Panjshir, residents express satisfaction that Karzai followed the constitution and accepted that he did not cross the 50 percent threshold required for outright victory in the first-round. In rural areas of the South and East, this nuance seems to be lost. There is universal concern that the high levels of fraud of August 20 would be repeated.

¶3. (SBU) This message is based upon reports from Mission civilian field representatives provided over the last few days. End summary.

The South: "Why didn't my vote count the first time?"

¶4. (SBU) Throughout the south, Pashtuns seem to share a profound apathy about the second round, and many say they expect a significantly lower turnout. Even the recent political gymnastics in Kabul about IEC methodology have been greeted locally with yawns, as most people see a Karzai win as inevitable and any delay a sign of foreign interference. This apathy, combined with the local planting season (of licit crops, such as wheat), could lead to exceptionally lower turnout unless Karzai's political machine is able to mobilize his supporters.

5 (SBU) Tribal elders in the Sirkaduz region of Nawa District (Helmand) exemplified the viewpoint of Pashtuns throughout southern Afghanistan, expressing displeasure at the runoff and at what they see as the rest of the world's pressuring Afghanistan, perhaps as a method of engineering an Abdullah victory. Their August 20 votes, they say, were valid and should have counted, and a Karzai victory is the only outcome they will accept as legitimate.

¶6. (C) There are signs that Karzai appears to understand that the election in Helmand is not about winning voters from Abdullah, but purely about turnout. PRT Helmand has heard credible reports that Karzai is targeting the Hazara community - which tends to vote as a block - as a priority for the second round campaign. Amir Mohamed Akhonzada,

brother of former Helmand governor Sher Mohamed Akhunzada, has arrived in Lashkar Gah to turn out the vote for Karzai, and reports indicate he brought USD700,000 - twice the sum Karzai spent in round one - to make it happen.

¶7. (SBU) Districts in the South where coalition forces have engaged in counterinsurgency operations since August 20 may provide an opportunity to deter fraud. Most notably, Nawa district was the site of the largest ballot stuffing operation on August 20. The PRT anticipates increased transparency there, but does not expect the drop in fraud to be proportional to the increase in security.

The East: Mixed Reactions Among Karzai Supporters

¶8. (SBU) Reaction to the runoff in pro-Karzai eastern provinces of Afghanistan was more mixed, and there appears to be a stronger understanding of the constitutional requirements that lead to a runoff in some areas. In other provinces, such as Khost, the cynicism of the South is repeated. Elsewhere, grumbling about international interference quickly transformed to "get out the vote" messages among governors as soon as Karzai announced the second round. In the more mountainous areas, the onset of winter weather could well be the biggest deterrent to voting.

¶9. (SBU) Paktya Governor Hamdard was pleased that the runoff would be held, stating that it would clarify the political situation and remove distrust of the government among the population. He did not believe that a national coalition government would work because of the structure of the Afghan

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government. He thought that, without a parliamentary system with a president and prime minister, a coalition government would move Afghanistan back seven years and benefit neither the Afghan public nor the international community.

¶10. (SBU) Now that the runoff has been announced, Ghazni governor Usmani, an ardent Karzai supporter, also supports the second round. His attitude has shifted markedly: before Karzai announced the second round, Usmani claimed that the fraud investigation was a "foreign plot" and he adamantly opposed a runoff. PRT Ghazni notes that it is unclear whether the local population shares the governor's newfound enthusiasm for the second round. (Worth remembering is that Bashardost won an overwhelming 66 percent of the Ghazni vote, leaving Karzai with a 24 percent second.)

¶11. (SBU) Nangarhar, home of outspoken governor Gul Agha Sherzai, also highlights a shift in attitude in Pashtun areas since the announcement of a runoff. The Pashtun majority that was threatening to boycott a potential runoff is now declaring its intent to participate. At an October 22 Jalalabad conference of 500 tribal elders from four eastern provinces, several elders complained it was unfair that Karzai had not won outright, but nevertheless called on their supporters to vote in even larger numbers on November 7. The governors of Nangarhar and Laghman are making impassioned pleas to voters to go to the polls.

¶12. (C) In the northern province of Faryab, which Karzai won, a discussion with party leaders of Jumbesh (Uzbek) and Jamiat (Tajik), revealed that ethnic considerations are at the center of their frustration with the runoff. Jumbesh leaders say they fear a coalition government because it would freeze out Uzbeks in favor of Tajiks and Pashtuns, and even suggested that Karzai may have reached a deal that puts Dostum's support for Karzai at risk.

Abdullah Supporters Content for the Moment

¶13. (SBU) In eastern Parwan province, which went for Abdullah in the first round, Tajik Governor Takwa has

enthusiastically imagined a come-from-behind victory for Abdullah. Although the expectation of an Abdullah victory is limited among voters, it is clear that the announcement of the second round reduced the threat that Abdullah supporters will take to the streets in provinces that support him. However, a disputed second-round result, especially if expectations of an Abdullah victory are too high, could revive that threat.

¶14. (SBU) Balkh province voted overwhelmingly for Abdullah, for whom Governor Atta remains an outspoken supporter. Since August 20, Atta has decried the high level of fraud and alleged that Abdullah supporters were taking up arms and preparing to protest if Karzai had been declared the first round victor. PRT Balkh has interviewed a wide variety of Afghans in Mazar-e Sharif, including prominent local businessmen, Governor Atta's political advisor, the provincial head of the Wehdat-e Islami party, the chief of police of Balkh Province, and a dozen officials from Khulm District. While some expressed concern about the rise in security incidents in the north over the past few months, they have voiced no particular concern that the runoff would raise ethnic or other tensions. In fact, the PRT detects a sense of relief over the resolution of the first round and that President Karzai announced his acceptance to hold a second round. (The exception to this was Sayedi, who said it was unfortunate that the first round of voting was all for naught - that many had taken great risks to vote the first time.)

¶15. (SBU) Atta political advisor (and Abdullah supporter) Yonusi was upbeat about the opportunity the runoff presents for the Abdullah camp. Others seemed wary of a fraud-ridden and still-ongoing election process. PRT contacts in Balkh universally expect that second-round turnout will be lower than turnout in the first round.

Economic Optimism Returns

¶16. (SBU) Despite the weariness from the electoral process, there is widespread optimism throughout the North that a final resolution of the presidential race will benefit the local economy in many areas. Many Afghans have observed a downturn in economic activity over the last few months, with both investors and consumers scaling back their transactions due to uncertainty about the elections.

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Comment:

¶17. (C) Afghans across the country clearly understand that the first round was marred by fraud and seem genuinely to want clean elections. Several highlighted the importance of having a "transparent" process during the second round. Nevertheless, there is little optimism that the second round will be a model of transparency and of legitimacy. Many, while pointing out the role of the international community in bringing about the runoff, also say the international community will have to play a strong role in minimizing the opportunities for fraud. Strongly implied is a lack of confidence in the Afghan government to manage the election process independently.

¶18. (C) The election process itself will likely to do little to strengthen local confidence in the central government. If the second round is perceived to be as fraud-ridden as the first, it will likely further diminish confidence in the central government. Karzai's political machine is already churning to shore up large voting blocks to overcome apathy among large swaths of the Pashtun population. The relative abilities of both candidates to get out the vote will likely be a key determinant in the election's outcome. End Comment.

¶19. (U) First Round Presidential Candidate Winners in each Province:
(Source: IEC Web Site:
<http://www.iec.org.af/results/resultsProvince>)

Totals:

Karzai won 21 provinces
Abdullah won 11 provinces
Bashardost won 2 provinces

By Province (percentage of vote):

- Badakhshan = Abdullah (50.0); Karzai (34.2)
- Badghis = Abdullah (63.7); Karzai (26.3)
- Baghlan = Abdullah (56.8); Karzai (29.6)
- Balkh = Abdullah (44.2); Karzai (39.6)
- Bamyan = Karzai (39.1); Bashardost (38.8); Abdullah (6.6)
- Day Kundi = Bashardost (60.9); Karzai (29.1); Abdullah (6.6)
- Farah = Karzai (57.1); Abdullah (22.0)
- Faryab = Karzai (59.9); Abdullah (29.7)
- Ghazni = Bashardost (61.1); Karzai (24.4); Abdullah (9.9)
- Ghor = Abdullah (46.7); Karzai (35.7)
- Herat = Karzai (44.5); Abdullah (41.7)
- Helmand = Karzai (72.5); Abdullah (5.3)
- Jowzjan = Karzai (58.0); Abdullah (25.3)
- Kabul = Karzai (48.8); Abdullah (29.3)
- Kapisa = Abdullah (69.1); Karzai (22.9)
- Khost = Karzai (69.1); Abdullah (6.5)
- Kandahar = Karzai (73.8); Abdullah (9.1)
- Konar = Karzai (81.1); Abdullah (7.0)
- Kunduz = Abdullah (54.6); Karzai (31.8)
- Laghman = Karzai (74.8); Abdullah (13.8)
- Logar = Karzai (42.7); Abdullah (17.6)
- Nangarhar = Karzai (75.2); Abdullah (6.0)
- Nimroz = Karzai (72.5); Abdullah (6.0)
- Nuristan = Karzai (46.2); Abdullah (41.2)
- Paktia = Karzai (71.6); Abdullah (4.8)
- Paktika = Karzai (53.5); Abdullah (23.6)
- Panjshir = Abdullah (68.1); Karzai (29.1)
- Parwan = Abdullah (63.3); Karzai (27.2)
- Samangan = Abdullah (43.5); Karzai (42.5)
- Sar-e Pol = Karzai (46.7); Abdullah (33.0)
- Takhar = Abdullah (51.8); Karzai (36.4)
- Uruzgan = Karzai (60.0); Abdullah (8.7)
- Wardak = Karzai (55.1); Abdullah (8.1)
- Zabul = Karzai (62.0); Abdullah (12.7)

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